[Fighting Ben]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: FIGHTING BEN

Date of First Writing March 3, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed B. R. Thomas (white)

Fictitious Name Ben Thorp

Street Address Camp Fornance

Place Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Furniture Salesman

Name of Writer John L. Dove

Name of Reviser State Office

Standing at the bedside of his dying father, Ben Thorp said: “Don't worry, Dad, I'll fight the battle for Mom and Sister. I'll see that they never have to suffer for anything.” A few moments later it was left to the fourteen year old lad to make good his promise; for Benjamin Thorp, his father, was no more.

When the responsibilities of a breadwinner fell upon the shoulders of Ben Thorp, he was residing on a 135-acre farm located on Turkey Creek, ten miles northwest of the town of Edgefield, South Carolina. The old Thorp home is still there, but the old red fields and gullies bear evidence of the [?] 10. S. C. Box, 2.

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fact that much of its former fertility has gone into the muddy waters of Turkey Creek. Too, the cardboard signs, nailed to a tree here and there and bearing the words - “POSTED, keep off” - plainly tell us that the place has been given to the use of game and wildlife.

According to Ben Thorp, there was nothing out of the ordinary about his boyhood life on Turkey Creek. Before his father died in February, 1892, he attended the old field school a few months each year, and, of course, went fishing occasionally in Turkey Creek with the Negro boys on the place. “I played and fought with the little niggers, ate corn bread, drank buttermilk, and grew,” is the way Ben described his young life.

His education is, indeed, very limited. His writing is very poor, and he makes use of slang words and Negro dialect very freely in expressing himself. It is all, no doubt, due to a lack of school advantages and to the constant association with illiterates. In speaking of his schooling, he casually remarked: “Oh, I began in the first grade and finished in the first grade. I just grew up and spread out, by main strength and awkwardness.”

When Mr. Thorp was asked a short time ago to tell of his early interests in life, he responded with a slight stammer: “Fi-fi-fight, fr-fr-frolic, and fee-feesh.” He was “quick on the trigger,” he said. He meant that he often resorted to the use of his fist, rather than arbitration, in the settlement of an argument. He says that he is a typical “son of old Edgefield.” He was named in honor of one of Edgefield's most noted sons, “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman.

While Ben Thorp had no political or military ambitions, he, like his namesake, was true to his convictions. When he felt called upon, he did 3 not hesitate to use his fist in the interest of a friend in a hot race for public office. His first political battle was in 1899, the year he cast his first ballot. He aided Ben Tillman and Ben Cogburn. The latter was for many years Clerk of Court in Edgefield County, and was a distant realtive of Ben's.

Yes, Ben Thorp has been a fighter and a true son of Edgefield. He says he is proud of the fact, too. He inherited this trait of character. His ancestors were fighters before him. His father was a Confederate veteran, an original member of the K.K.K., and rode as a “Red Shirt” with Mart Gary, M. C. Butler, and Ben Tillman during the stirring days of reconstruction in 1876. His grandfather followed Colonel P. M. Butler in the Mexican War, and his great-grandfather was with General Pickens in the war of the American Revolution. Ben admits being a follower on the Toney faction in the Toney-Booth feud which plagued society and politics for a number of years in Edgefield.

Ben, true to his promise made his dying father, remained with his widowed mother and his sister. Without one word of complaint, he assumed the duties of a family keeper and farm manager. He worked hard and was very considerate of his mother and sister. “I plowed row for row with the other niggers on the place from the time I was fourteen until I quit farming years later.” He made big crops of cotton, corn, and other crops on the three-horse farm he operated. His main crop was cotton, and his experience with this was as follows:

“I was like the average Edgefield farmer - a cotton farmer. Pretty near everybody would look foreword to lay-by time during July and August. Then we'd have the usual round of preaching, picnics, politics, and pitch 4 battles all over old Edgefield,” And then Ben added: “Th-th-them was courtin' days, too.” He told of other bygones.

“No, I've never made money on the farm. I made a good living, though, and had lots of fun. I can now look back and see the mistakes I made as a farmer. I depended too much on cotton, and failed to plan for the future. It was a habit of the farmers then to think in terms

of cotton bales, and I had the disease. If I had thought more about agriculture and less about cotton and lay-by time, before I was married, it may be that I wouldn't now be afraid of the 'bill toters' on my heel."

Ben Thorp caught his breath, hesitated, and reached for his smoking material. It was not till he had licked his cigarette into shape and was feeling in his pocket for a match that he spoke again.

"Mary Bunch and I had been playing around together for a long time. In fact, we had gone to school together and joined the church - Gilgal Baptist - together before we were grown. It was during big meeting time at our church in June, 1900. We decided one day at the church that we had fr-frolicked long enough; that we should get married and settle down. My mother had died a few months before, and my sister had married. So I really needed a companion at home. Mary made me promise to quit f-fighting and raising so much sand over politics. I promised her I would do that. Under the circumstances, I reckon I'd have promised to sprout wings if she had asked me. Anyway, I broke my promise the next day. A fellow tried to scare my horse while I was on my way to Edgefield. I jumped on him at the courthouse and was giving him the one-two when a friend stopped me."

Mary Bunch forgave Ben for violating the agreement and permitted their marriage to take place on the date selected. His embarrassments, 5 however, were not over. Major, his diving horse, had more trouble laid up for him. It had rained, and the red clay roads around Gilgal Church were very muddy. Major had never liked to pull in mud, according to Ben. He balked as Ben and Mary neared Gilgal, the place of their marriage. No amount of persuasion could induce him to pull the little buggy, with umbrella top, on to the church. Ben explained: "I unhitched Major and told him, 'D-d-dern you, stand there. I shall be obeyed, and I w-will git married.' We left Major and the buggy standing there in the road and walked on to the church and were married."

Mr. and Mrs. Ben Thorp began their married life at the old Thorp home. The people who lived around Gilgal were prosperous and happy then. There was no special scarcity of money. Men, women, and children, for the most part, were gay, light-hearted, and hospitable. So Ben's and Mary's kith, kin, and neighbors entertained and showered them with wedding gifts and wished them well. And all was well for Ben and Mary during the next few years. He produced big crops of cotton and received a good price for the same. His narrative in this connection runs as follows:

“I made an unusually large crop of cotton the year I was married, and that fall the price was so good I got rich. And the next year, 1921, was favorable, and I got still richer. When 1922 came, I felt I was sitting on top of the world. I had money in the bank. I rode around in a new automobile. I had bought new furniture for the home, and I had spent money freely for farm tools, and so forth. Yes, sir, I sort of felt I'd gotten to be a 'constipated gentleman.' If one had told me then I'd be as poor as I am now, I wouldn't have believed it.”

Ben Thorp had reached the peak of his prosperity and pleasure in 1921.

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The next year, he made the mistake of trying to grow richer off his art of cotton growing. He purchased high-priced fertilizers in abundance and bought many other things at a high cost. He staked his all on cotton in the spring of 1922. The boll weevil invaded his farm that summer and fall, and he lost heavily. He was compelled to mortgage his 135 acres at the beginning of 1923, in order to secure money with which to purchase farm and home supplies. His luck the next year, and the next, was no better. He explained his “picklement” in the following language:

“I had to buy and buy so much during 1923 that I spent every dollar I could get my hands on. All during the year, the niggers on the place continued to ask for meat, meal, flour, sugar, coffee, hats, coats, pants, dresses, sox, stockings, shirts, shoes, snuff, soap,

tobacco, and then some. The more it rained, the more the grass grew, and the more the weevil came. But it made no difference with the dern niggers and their wants. When Christmas, 1923, came, I had nothing left that I could call my own, except Mary, my three girl babies, and my 1921 model Ford. There was nothing for me to do but put out the fire, call the dog, and call it quits."

In January, 1924, Ben Thorp became an ex-farmer. He surrendered the old ancestral farm and home to his creditors. He then packed his wife, his babies, and his dog in his flivver and brought them to Columbia to live, if the living could be found.

He did find a way of making a living in Columbia, and the faithful old flivver helped him. He went to work immediately as a collector for the Palm Furniture Company, at a salary of fifteen dollars a week and a small commission. He used his automobile in making his daily and weekly rounds over the city streets and alleyways. The following is his account of his first experience 7 as an installment collector:

"I, of course, was as green as crab grass in the furniture business, and as a collector in a city. The boss gave me a bunch of old accounts they had among the toughest customers in the city. I started out with these old bills on one Monday morning. I made one of my first calls in Glencoe Mill village. I left my car on Huger Street and walked down an alley in search of a certain house number. When I found the house, I knocked on the door.

"'Who's that a-knockin'?' came a voice from within.

"Furniture man! I shouted.

"'What furnisher man yuh be?' came back the answer.

"'Palm Furniture Company.'

"'Ain't owin' yuh a dern thing.'

“'Wh-why, I have a bill here against you for a four-piece bedroom suite, some chairs, and a kitchen cabinet. You've only paid ten dollars on it. Let me come in, please, and I'll explain further.'

“The door opened, and out came a tall, skinny-faced, red-haired, snuff-dipping woman.

“'Done tole yuh once I ain't owin' yuh a dern thing.'

“'Have you receipts to prove your claim?' I asked.

“'Yes, jist like this: “kerdap,”' she spit at me.

“Well, sir, that old alley bat came within an inch of spitting that gob of snuff amber in my face. She made me so mad I saw red. My old Edgefield fighting blood boiled to the point where I took it upon myself, while the old alley bat cussed me, to walk through that house and drag out, piece by piece, our furniture. When I took the goods to the store, the boss told 8 me that he was raising my salary to eighteen dollars a week. He furthermore told me that, if I succeeded in collecting the money, or the goods, on a number of other certain accounts, I would be made a twenty-five dollar a week man.

When he was asked if he succeeded in getting the promotion, his answer was, “I di-didn't miss it.” And Ben Thorp soon won the reputation of being one of the most successful and daring installment collectors in Columbia. Honest buyers respected and trusted him. But when the dishonest buyer saw Ben and his rattling flivver come their way, they knew instinctively that it meant one of two things - pay, or Ben gets the goods. His greatest weakness, or maybe it was his strength, as a collector, was that he often permitted the hard luck tales of the unfortunate to stand in the way of his progress.

Ben Thorp and his flivver traveled early and late, “beating the bushes” in search of a collection on an account, or else in search of a party who had moved away and was in arrears on an account. He worked eight years with the Palm Furniture Company.

During his eight years experience as collector, he coined a number of expressions now in common use among installment collectors: “Alley bat,” for an inhabitant of the alleys and back streets; “furnisher crook,” for one of unethical practices in the furniture business; “constipated gentleman,” for one living in splendor but slow in meeting his installment payments; “skilley vitch,” for a woman who resorts to the use of charm and physical attractions in lieu of the contracted payments.

At the beginning of 1932, according to Mr. Thorp, the old flivver which he had obtained during the better days had become worn out. He then had to walk the rounds in making collections. This, he decided, was too much 9 for one of his age. He, therefore, resigned his job with the Palm Furniture Company and immediately went to work as a floor salesman for a used furniture dealer in Columbia.

Ben and Mary Thorp have raised five children - Carrie, Elizabeth, Ruth, Louise, and Ben. They are all married. The girls are now Mesdames Fowler, Walker, Bankhead, and Pendleton. Ben lives in Virginia, and is successfully operating a cafeteria in that State. “I, of course, miss my children when I report to the boss at home each night, but I fight on in the furniture game,” is the way he put it.

Yes, Ben Thorp has worked hard since that cold February day in 1892, when he made that promise to his dying father to become a dutiful son. He not only made good his promise to care for his dependent mother and sister, but he keeps on keeping on in caring for his family. Each day, Sunday excepted, he can be found, ever on the alert, at his job. He is now in charge of a branch store owned by a large used furniture dealer. The store is on the 1000 block of Gervais Street, Columbia. He works on a commission basis and admits that the business affords a good living for him and his wife.

Ben Thorp, they say, was a very handsome fellow in his younger days. He is not a bad looking man now at sixty-one years. He has a plentiful supply of iron-gray hair; his face is full; and his eyes are still clear and blue. His greatest handicap in the way of looks,

perhaps, is his teeth. Just one tooth is left in the front part of his mouth. But this one apparently serves him well until his blue eyes see something of beauty. His thick tongue then begins to beat and hang on the old snag in such a way that his words come with a sort of skip, hop, and jump. He becomes afraid “th-th-the p-p-pretty th-th-thing” won't care to stop and talk to him.

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While his stocky body has lost much of its former pep and suppleness, his old friendly honest self is still there. He loves to talk, and he has many friends in Columbia. He also loves to handle old furniture, and he “fi-fi-fights” on.